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ABSTRACT

Standard English has not disappeared, but merely changed as it "must" change when the dominant class setting the standard undergoes change. If teachers are to succeed in persuading pupils to change their language, they must know and teach the standard as it is, not as it used to be, while still implanting in the minds of some students the idea of honest craftsmanship in words--of more than just the cultivated language of the powerful. Definitions of literacy presuppose motives, but while it is true that inability to use standard English can often deny all but menial employment, the mastery of a standard dialect guarantees nothing. Language intervention in the United States has always worked from the top down, in the interest of the interveners. It is these two questions, of motive and method, as well as one further question of social and educational policy, that are at the heart of the debates about the teaching of standard English. In Paulo Freire's "Education for Critical Consciousness" and "Pedagogy of the Oppressed," the key to Freire's motives is his contrast between education for domestication and education for liberation. His methods are built on the initiative of the learner. American society continues to use standard English as an instrument not of liberation but of domination. Speakers of nonstandard English will never learn the standard unless they have the opportunity to use the standard naturally, to say or write what they want to say or write to someone who wants to hear or read it. (HTH)

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Teaching Standard English: False Premises and False Promises

James Sledd

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Teaching Standard English: False Premises and False Promises

Let me get rid of the first false premise instantly: there is just nobody who opposes the teaching of standard English, in right ways and for right reasons, to students who want to learn it--and nobody can teach it to students who don't. There is no truth whatsoever in the allegation that a handful of intellectual Ku Kluxers, including me, want to deny instruction in standard English to some or any students.

It is equally silly to deny the existence of a standard American English. Though no one accent has the national prestige which Received Pronunciation enjoys in Britain, the differences among educated varieties are so limited that all our regional standards are easily intelligible to the educated wherever English is spoken. In its written form, the American standard is not really American but global. Serious printed English prose is much the same throughout the world.

Like the other versions of standard English, our version is a class dialect, as standard English has always been since its development in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Questions have of course been raised, by scholars as vari-

ous as E. D. Hirsch and Geneva Smitherman, but their questions are political resolutions in an interrogative disguise. The sociolinguists with their statistics have fully confirmed what commonsensical observers already knew--that linguistic variation and socioeconomic class can often be neatly correlated. If I should say, "Ain't no doubt in mah min' 'bout dat," you would know instantly that a professor was pretending that he really works for his living. The standardized European languages are all of them languages of established power, marvelous contrivances by which the dominant maintain their dominance and persuade the dominated that as under-dogs they deserve to get kicked around.

It follows that when the nature of social power changes, uncertainty about the nature of the linguistic norm must follow. With the reduction of more and more Americans to poverty, linguistic stratification in the United States will grow sharper, and that sharp stratification will make it harder for the under-dogs to get out from under. Toward the other end of the social scale, the divorce of power from traditional linguistic and literary cultivation has been (one might say) finalized, and the demands on the use and users of English which the computerized culture of high technology is making are new demands, demands which academic humanists are by training and (one wishes) by conviction

ill-equipped to meet. That is why protected academics so often complain that the world's most flourishing language has gone to hell. But standard English has not disappeared. It has only changed, as it must change when the class itself which sets the standard changes.

Teachers, if they hope for any success in persuading their pupils to change their language, must know and teach the standard as it is, not as it used to be; but in the minds of at least some students, we might also implant "the idea of honest craftsmanship in words, by teaching not just the language actually used in the conduct of our nation's important affairs . . . but the language that ought to be used, a cultivated language always in touch with reality but never quite contented with it." It's not really a paradox to say that while we follow the language of the powerful, we must also go beyond it.

So much for premises, true and false. My two words ought and must raise questions about promises and motives, what we hope to do and why we hope to do it. The teaching of standard English is instruction in the language of the literate, which everybody's for; but why is everybody for it? In the midst of a supposed literacy crisis, we might well ask what literacy is and why it should be cultivated.

The answers to both questions are multifarious. The relatively new phrase

computer literacy reminds us that the meaning of the word literacy changes with the situations and purposes of its users. Sometimes literacy has meant little more than the ability to read one's name and write it. Functional literacy usually means the ability to read and write well enough to get through a plain man's day in the United States without notable disaster. Literacy for a politician is skill in using words to create and ~~in~~ interpret deceptive images--to seem to say one thing while meaning quite another, to say just nothing at any convenient length, or to detect one's rivals when they engage in such maneuvers. Literacy for professors of English, when they make the ritual complaint that their students are illiterate, means the ability to read the professors' favorite books and to repeat their opinions of them with an air of respectful conviction in appropriately professorial language.

Definitions of literacy, that is, presuppose motives, and it isn't very revealing to say that one favors the teaching of standard English and the cultivation of literacy unless one also says why. Corporate recruiters, for example, who believe that education is for economic growth, conventionally complain that even the [✓]resumes of candidates for recruitment are weak in spelling, grammar, and punctuation; but the recruiters are not interested in traditional elegance

or in the qualities of language which befit free citizens. As the senior vice-president of a big Austin bank said last spring, the recruiters want their trainees, with no thought for any purpose but upward mobility in the corporate world, "to generate polished work products or to make impressive sales or other presentations." In that one quoted phrase, any humanist worth his pipe and tweed would object to the jargon of to generate and to the pattern of modification in sales or other presentations.

Yet our own biggest professional organization, the National Council of Teachers of English, hasn't gone much beyond Mr. Pete Foster of Austin's American Bank. In the arguments about bidialectalism back in the 60's and early 70's, spokespersons for the NCTE kept talking about "upward mobility in the mainstream culture." What is upward mobility? Upward mobility in the United States doesn't mean earning enough money to have food, clothing, shelter, medical care--the necessities and maybe a bit more. Upward mobility means putting one's neighbor's nose out of conspicuously joint by getting and/spending more than one's neighbor can get and spend. The very idea of upward mobility presupposes that as one person goes up, another must go down, so that there will always be the losers who never tempted anyone into the deadly sin of envy; and upward mobility for Americans means the continued

waste of irreplaceable natural resources and the continued exploitation of weaker countries.' Despite all that, the NCTE came out loudly for upward mobility. The students who didn't learn standard English, the spokespersons said, would be forever denied economic opportunity and social acceptance.

In such talk, one must see both a grievously unworthy motive and a dangerously false promise. While it is true that inability to use standard English can be used, and often is, to deny any but menial employment, the mastery of a standard dialect guarantees nothing, as unemployed Ph. D.'s in particular and English teachers in general ought to know. Between 1979 and 1982, Carl Rowan reported just last month, "8.3 million Americans . . . fell into poverty." What is poverty in the interpretation of such statistics? Poverty in 1982 was an income of less than 9 thousand dollars a year for a family of 4; yet by that wretched standard, 1 black in 3, 3 Hispanics among 10, and 1 white out of 8 were poor--an "increase of 28.2 percent in the poverty rate" in just 3 years. For whites, the poverty rate jumped even more--33 percent; yet at the same time, "social programs and . . . unemployment benefits" were cut by 10 BILLION dollars. Last winter in affluent Austin, when the cold in December and January was the worst in the weather bureau's history, a thousand homeless people were existing (I won't say living) in our

streets. A thousand students a year drop out of Austin's schools, so that the city is assured of a constant supply of truck-drivers, housemaids, and garbage men; but it would be a cruel hoax to promise the/^{children} of poverty that if only they mastered standard English, they would escape to better things. I have never forgotten the black college graduate Jesse Fuller, with whom I worked in a furniture warehouse in Atlanta in the early 30's. Jesse never got the foremanship, though in fact he kept that warehouse running. The foreman was always white.

at least

Other publicized purposes for teaching standard English have been/less grow-
eling than "upward mobility in the mainstream culture." E. D. Hirsch has now abandoned his earlier scheme for regimenting the teaching of composition nationwide according to the standards of "correctness" and "relative readability," but having abandoned that "linguistics of literacy," with its odd notion of a classless and unchanging grapholect, Hirsch now proposes a new form of cultural imperialism, "the ideology of literacy" [emphasis added], which "implies specific contents as well as formal skills." Because it is hard, as Hirsch informs us, to read and write on subjects which we don't know much about, one might conclude that the schools should cultivate openness to new ideas, wide reading, and general intellectual curiosity, and that they should provide constant practice in the read-

ing of texts which rest on alien presuppositions--briefly, that the educational system should do all it can to promote the rational acceptance and indeed the positive evaluation of diversity. But Hirsch draws a different conclusion. "A certain extent of shared, canonical knowledge is inherently necessary," he says, "to a literate democracy"; and from there he goes on to define "the minimal aim of schooling" as "acculturation into a national literate culture," the learning of "what the 'common reader' of a newspaper in a literate culture could be expected to know." The whole of Hirsch's new argument (which ignores the question where one finds a literate democracy) reduces to the assertion that because we all should be able to write easily what we all should easily understand, a national authority should define some body of "canonical knowledge" and require instruction in it. Maybe, Hirsch concludes, the Educational Testing Service should be praised as "our hidden National Board of Education."

If Hirsch is contrasted with Paulo Freire and his "education for critical consciousness," one is tempted to compare the real powers that govern American education to the repressive Brazilians who drove Freire into exile because he taught too many of the oppressed how to read and act and think as free makers of a truly human world. Language intervention in the United States has always worked from the top down, in the interests of the interveners and their corporate bosses,

and that is one reason why, after twenty-five years of interventions, American education has only moved from the proclamation of one crisis (after Sputnik) to the proclamation of another.

But I am not ready, quite yet, to talk at least briefly about Freire. I want instead to say something about Thomas Farrell, a disciple of Walter J. Ong, one of our most eminent writers about literacy. In the December issue of College Composition and Communication, Farrell developed an argument for the teaching of standard English which is based, not on the socioeconomic good of the learner or on "acculturation into a national literate culture," but on the learner's higher cognitive development. "Black children," Farrell says, "score lower than white children on IQ tests," which are "valid and reliable measures of abstract thinking." Historically, abstract thinking developed when the ancient Greeks moved from orality to literacy after they developed their alphabet. One result of that cognitive transformation of primitives to alphabetic literates was "the emergence of the verb 'to be,'" which is "very important because a language with only action verbs is not likely to develop propositional thinking." "One begins to learn propositional thinking by mastering and controlling hypotactic grammatical structures. . . . In this country, that means learning the grammar of standard English." But black children come from an oral culture, and oral cultures

favor parataxis. "Most black ghetto children" also use nonstandard "forms of the verb 'to be,'" which are "virtually action-verbs, not copulatives," so that such children may find the standard forms incomprehensible. They will therefore be more capable of abstract thought "when they master the forms of standard English," including be and syntactic subordination. They may be helped to such mastery by oral-aural exercises like rehearsing and reading aloud "selections from William Holmes McGuffey's Eclectic Readers." In at least some of these oral-aural performances, it would be important to stress "enunciation," for the aim is to help black children "to interiorize the sound and sense of standard grammar and of literate thinking."

If you think that is parody, I invite you to read Farrell's article yourselves. I personally am sceptical of his tests, his history, his causal connection between parataxis and nonstandard forms of be on the one hand and deficiency in abstract thought on the other, and his thought-smothering exercises. More generally, I distrust evangelical language-interventionists who don't concern themselves with the needs and wishes of the prospective readers, writers, and thinkers and don't ask who gains or loses what, in the encompassing society, by the presence or absence of literacy and abstract thought in varying degrees. In both

motive and method, that is, there is plenty of room for argument about the teaching of standard English, though if that teaching is considered in the abstract, without regard to motive or method, absolutely no one has objected to it.

It is these two questions, of motive and method, and one further question of social and educational policy, which are at the heart of the debates about the teaching of standard English; and though I formed my own obstinate opinions long before a graduate student introduced her provincial Georgia professor to the work of Paulo Freire, I have found his motives and methods very congenial. Since I must make a long story as short as my natural verbosity will allow, I urge you to read at least Freire's Education for Critical Consciousness and Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Here I can only say that a key to Freire's motives is his constant contrast between education for domestication and education for liberation, education for taming, as an animal is tamed, or education for making free. Since Freire aims, of course, for liberation, his methods are built on the initiative of the learner, whom Freire tries to engage in creative activity from the very first lesson. I would insist on similar aims and methods in the teaching of standard English. Speakers of nonstandard English will never learn the standard

unless they have the opportunity to use the standard naturally, to say or write what they want to say or write to somebody who wants to hear or read it. That means that a head-on attack on our students' nonstandard English is the worst of all possible tactics.

I see no point in transferring to the teaching of English the mimicry and memorization which too often go on in foreign-language classes.

If students can be motivated to read, they will be constantly exposed to the standard dialect, and their productive use of language can be nudged gently in the same direction, always by example and, when the time is right, by explicit teaching. But the student's desire to learn and use standard English is the one absolute essential. If that desire isn't present, or if we kill it by verbal nit-picking, the effort to teach the standard will inevitably fail.

That effort has failed, I should remind you, with thousands of students for literally hundreds of years, and that plain fact raises the question of social and educational policy which I mentioned a moment ago. No matter what we do or how skilfully we do it, many of our students will never really master standard English, whether spoken or written. Some have no real chance to learn it, because

of the circumstances of their lives in an unjust society; and it does no good to pretend, in such circumstances, that any student can learn anything if properly taught. That pretense merely diverts attention from social injustice, and leads to the condemnation of teachers when in fact the encompassing society has forbidden the teaching which it has also enjoined. Other students have no desire to learn the standard, which they intuitively recognize as a threat to their identity, the instrument of an alien culture. For such reasons, the majority of Americans cannot claim that mastery of standard English which the College Board now says is essential for every college entrant.

My question, then, is what treatment our schools and colleges should give to students who either cannot or will not learn to speak and write as we think they should and as we pretend we can. The National Council's answer is perfectly plain. Such students, as Walter Loban said twenty years ago, will be forever denied economic opportunity and social acceptance--though of course we know that "nice people" like Henry Kissenger and Richard Nixon can be forgiven for linguistic lapses which would damn a hillbilly, a

Hispanic, or a black. I believe, on the other hand, that users of nonstandard dialects are just as educable as anybody else and that they ought to be educated, not rejected. The one use of standard English which in fact is indispensable in education is the reading of it, since nothing much gets printed in other dialects; but if students can read, they can learn without limit.

So I come back to my original statement, that there is just nobody who opposes the teaching of standard English, in right ways and for right reasons; and from that repeated assertion, I can move to my final question--why we have made such a dreadful fuss about our students' language. The answer I have been driven to is that we and the society which has shaped us continue to use standard English as an instrument, not of liberation, but of domination. We demand mastery of the standard not because such mastery is really necessary for the education of our students but because the privileged want to protect their own advantage, not to share it. And the constant emphasis on students' language serves another purpose: it diverts attention from the social conditions which guarantee that the standard will be either inaccessible or undesirable to the majority. If

we really want all our students to learn and use standard English, then our first duty is to work for social justice, to remind the decision-makers that if people are to speak and write alike, they must also live alike and live together. In Austin,^{Texas,} that prerequisite is scandalously missing. East Austin is poor, west Austin rich. East Austin is Hispanic and black, west Austin Anglo. As long as that huge geographic division exists, and as long as it marks equally impassable social and economic barriers, it is brutal and hypocritical for Austin teachers to demand standard English of all students, and it is a simple lie to say that all of Austin's students can learn standard English if only they are properly taught in Austin's schools.

Let me close with a damning example. The theme of this month's convention of the 4C's is "Making Language the Cornerstone of an Education for Freedom." I cannot imagine a more destructive pretense. Such talk flatters the self-importance of English teachers but does nothing for the freedom of our students--freedom which the schools can't give them, freedom which they will never have unless they take it from the society which makes economic growth, not human freedom, the aim of education.